

CRELLA Spring Seminar 2012



# Washback and writing assessment

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# Teaching, assessment and testing



Learning by imitation

Teaching by transmission

Teaching and learning as shared enterprise

**Teacher** needs to know

- A**      What learner needs to know
- B**      How much of this the learner already knows
- C**      How learner can get from B to A

**Learner** needs to learn to become self directed

# Assessment

Assessment = gathering information to reach a decision

Educational assessment vs. proficiency assessment

## Educational decisions

Prognosis

Formative

Achievement

Supporting learning

Auditing learning

## Proficiency decisions

Competence

Competition

# Assessment and testing

Tests are a specific kind of assessment:

- special conditions apply

- more formal/ ritualistic

- performance is elicited using defined, replicable procedures

- conducted within predetermined time frame

- score or grade assigned to performance

→ valid, reliable, informative, defensible

Other forms of assessment include:

- informal questioning, observation, self-report, portfolio, conference etc.

Possible to carry out all functions of assessment without testing

Possible to use testing techniques to inform teaching and learning

# Testing and teaching



1. What is 'washback' and why does it matter?
2. The 'overlap' between test and curriculum
3. What makes learners successful on a test of writing?

# What is washback?

- The effect of testing on teaching and learning  
(Hughes 2004 p.53)
- The effect on the language teaching and learning  
*leading up to the test*  
(McNamara and Roever, 2007 p.235)
- The extent to which the *introduction* and *use* of a test influences language teachers and learners to *do things they would not otherwise do* that promote or inhibit language learning  
(Messick 1996 p. 241)

# Language testing and washback studies

- 1970s      Assumption that washback is negative: narrowing of the curriculum - 'multiple choice teaching'
- 1980s      Assumption that better assessments can lead to positive washback – 'levers for change'
- 1990s      Washback theory problematises assumptions
- 2000s      Washback revealed as complex, dependant on people as much as/ more than tests

Washback studies can be used in teacher training both in order *to influence test preparation practices* and also more generally to encourage teachers *to reflect on the reasons for their and others' practices*

(Alderson, 2004)

# What is washback?

- ***Participants***

- Learners, teachers, text book writers, administrators, parents, politicians etc.

- ***Processes***

- Learning, teaching

- ***Products***

- Materials, courses, language abilities



# What is washback?

- ***Washback direction***
  - Positive and negative effects
- ***Washback variability***
  - Different effects on different individuals
- ***Washback intensity***
  - Strong and weak effects

# Modelling washback: Overlap



## Target Task Characteristics

- What will language learners need to do with the language in the ‘real world’?
  - Nature of input
  - Nature of output
  - Interactivity
  - Cognitive processes
  - Knowledge resources
  - Metacognitive strategies

# Modelling washback: Overlap

- What will language learners need to do with the language to succeed on the test?
  - Nature of input
  - Nature of output
  - Interactivity
  - Cognitive processes
  - Knowledge resources
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Test Design Characteristics

# Modelling washback: Overlap



**Target Task Characteristics**

**Test Design Characteristics**

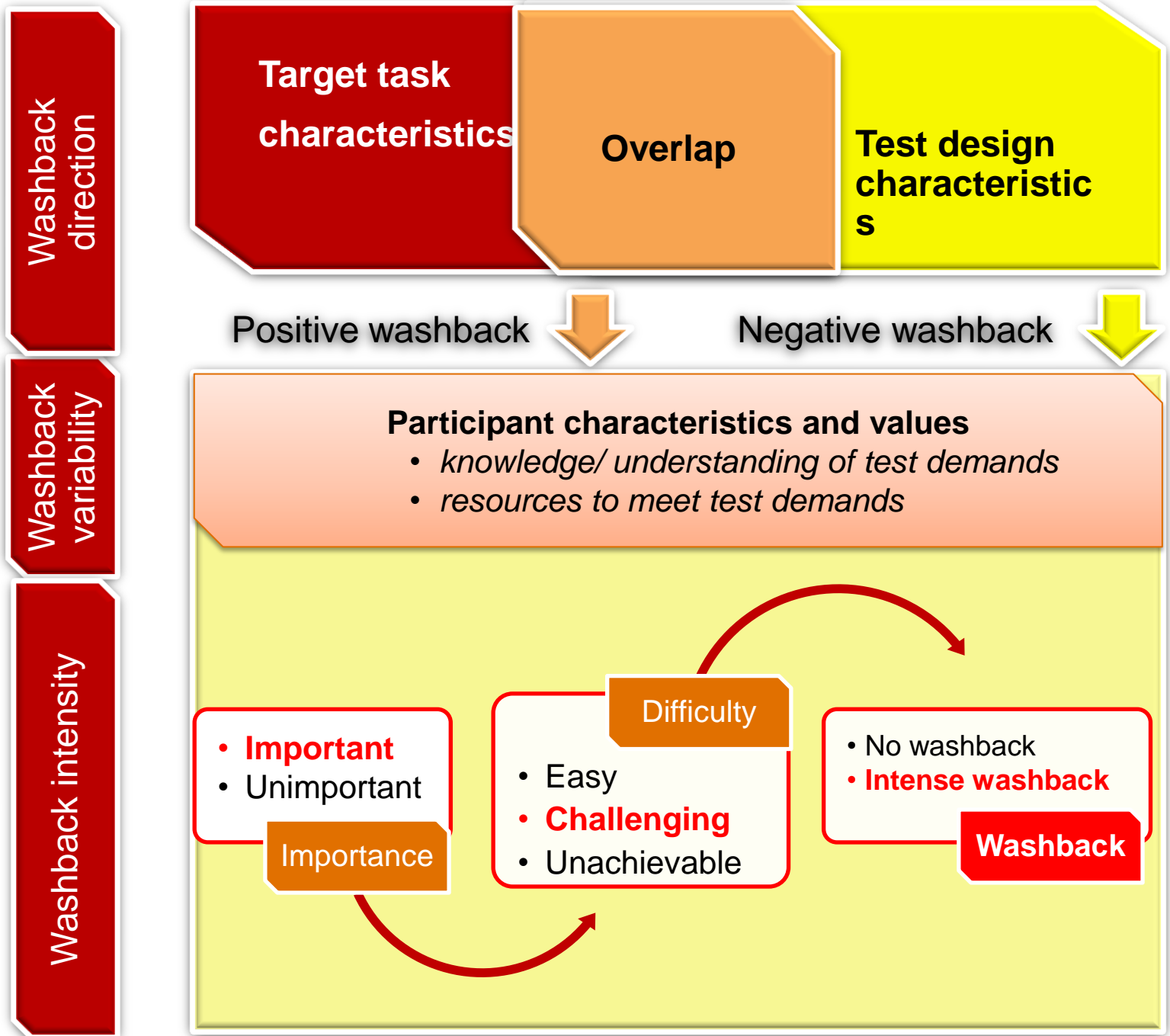
**Maximum Overlap: Studying for the test is to develop skills for the target domain**

# Washback variability and washback intensity

Individuals are differently affected by tests...

- Tests matter more to some people than to others
- Some people are better informed about tests than others
- Tests are more difficult for some people than for others
- Some people have more faith in tests than others
  - Adopters ✓
  - Adapters ?
  - Resisters ✗

# A model of washback



# Washback by design

## Some key questions

- Target skills
- Test design features
- Test stakes and importance
- Participants' knowledge and resources
- Processes: asking, watching
- Products: measuring



*“What is missing . . . are analyses of **test results** which **indicate whether** students have **learnt more** or learned **better because they have studied for a particular test**”*

Wall 2002, p.502

## Context

- EAP English for academic purposes, preparation for academic study in the UK
- ielts a test of English for academic purposes designed to test readiness to study at tertiary level through the medium of English
- Preessional English Courses intended to prepare students for their courses at university
- ielts Preparation Courses intended to enable students to achieve their required ielts score
- Combination courses Preessional English with an ielts preparation component



# Overlap

- How far does the design of the test cover the language skills that students need for academic study in English?



# What is writing in the real world?

A (new) technology

A set of socially contextualised practices

Highly variable both in form and purpose

In comparison with speech, more...

Permanent

Complex

Planned

Formal

Distant

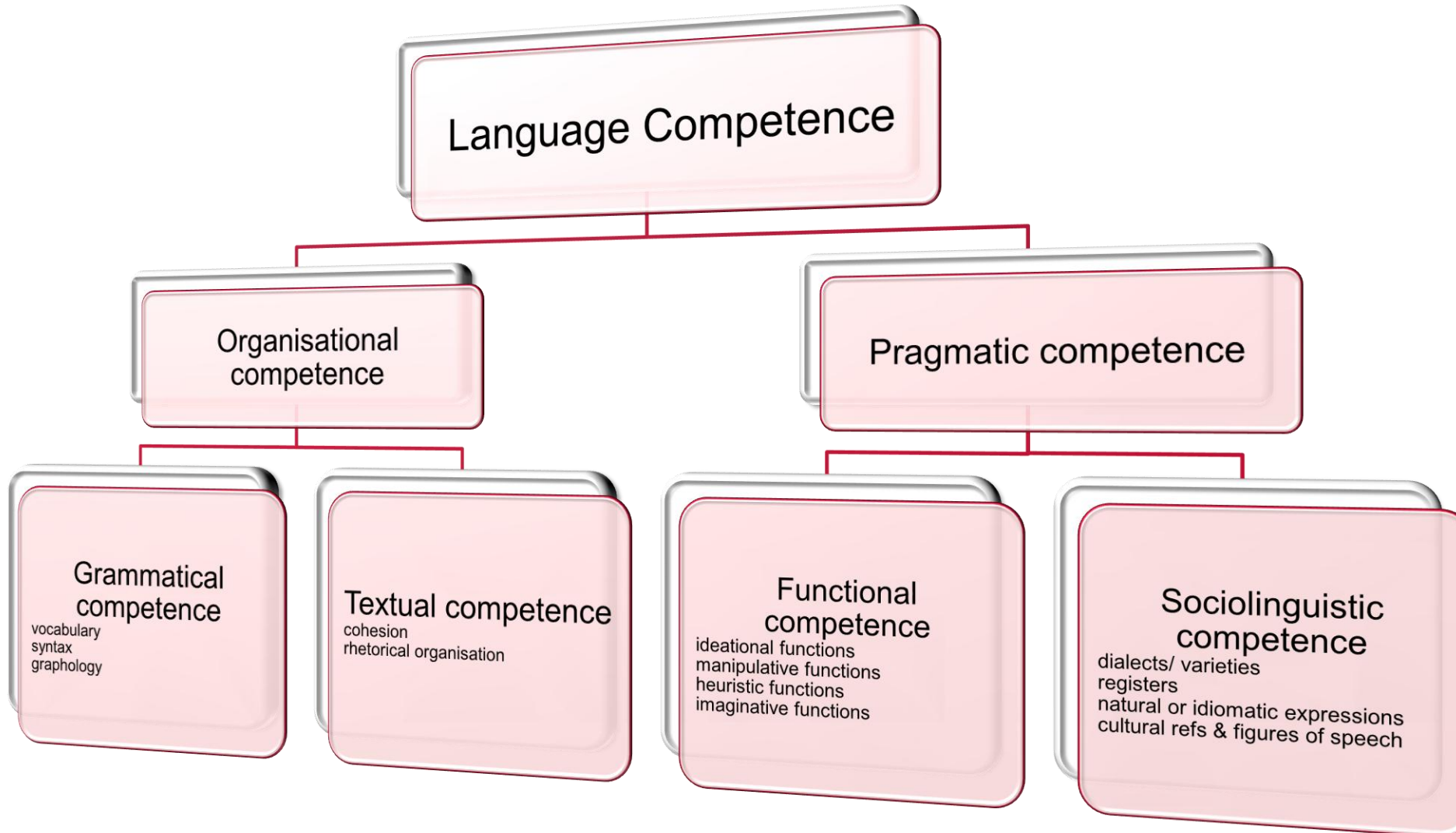
Lexically dense

Orthographic

## Cognitive aspects

- The knowledge factor
  - multiple competencies (Bachman and Palmer 1996)
- Processing factor
  - established procedures enable fluent performance with online planning reduced to acceptable amounts and timing

# Bachman & Palmer Model



# Academic Writing

What is *academic* writing?



- ***main form of assessment of student learning*** in universities
- usually based on ***external sources of data***
- involves use of ***evidence*** to ***indicate*** or ***test*** a ***conclusion***
- may involve ***induction, abstraction, deduction*** and ***generalisation from given knowledge to new situations***

(Biggs and Collis 1982)



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You should spend about 20 minutes on this task.

The chart below shows the number of men and women in further education in Britain in three periods and whether they were studying fulltime or part-time. Summarise the information by selecting and reporting the main features, and make comparisons where relevant.

Write at least 150 words.



### Task 2A

You should spend about 40 minutes on this task.  
Write about the following topic.

The first car appeared on British roads in 1888. By the year 2000 there may be as many as 29 million vehicles on British roads.

Alternative forms of transport should be encouraged and international laws introduced to control car ownership and use.

To what extent do you agree or disagree?

Give reasons for your answer and include any relevant examples from your knowledge or experience.

Write at least 250 words.

# Overlap between ielts and academic writing:

areas of similarity

2 writing tasks

c. 20 minutes describing a graph or table

c. 40 minutes discursive essay on topic of general interest

- Task fulfilment
    - Organise present and explain data
    - Describe stages in a process
    - Describe an object, event or series of events
    - Explain how something works
  - Coherence and cohesion
    - Arrangement of information to make it easy for the reader to retrieve
    - Effective use of cohesive devices
  - Vocabulary and sentence structure
    - Accuracy, effectiveness and range of syntax and lexis
  - Arguments ideas and evidence
    - Present the solution to a problem
    - Present and justify an opinion
    - Compare and contrast evidence, opinions and justifications
    - Evaluate and challenge ideas, evidence or an argument
  - Communicative quality
    - Ability of the writer to convey a clear message to the reader
- Appropriate responses are short essays or general reports addressed to lecturers (or examiners)



# Overlap between ielts and academic literacy:

## areas of difference

- Topics and objects of enquiry
  - General rather than specific content
  - Phenomenal rather than metaphenomenal objects of enquiry
- Rhetorical task
  - Hortation: A judgement about the desirability of a given entity or phenomenon
- Writing from sources
  - Paraphrase and language of citation
  - Referencing of sources and plagiarism
- Length and time allowed
  - 150 words and 250 words in 60 minutes
- Addressees/ raters
  - University 'lecturer' and 'educated non-specialist readers'
  - Judgement applied to language ability or content



# Learners: Participants and Settings



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- 476 Students
  - 55% China/Taiwan
  - 19% Other East Asia
  - 13% Western European
- 14 Institutions
  - English for Academic Purposes
  - IELTS Preparation
  - Combination EAP/ IELTS

# Asking: Teachers contrast ielts prep course and EAP course activities

## **ielts Preparation**

Students memorise useful phrases and structures

Students take practice tests

Teaching how to describe graphs and trends

Grammar correction on written work

Feedback in form of IELTS bands

## **English for Academic Purposes**

Working with reading material in students' intended subject areas

Teaching of sub-technical academic vocabulary

Referencing, quoting and synthesising from sources

Writing summaries of source texts

Individual project work

Extended (project) writing

Teaching note taking and making skills

Awareness raising for students of the expectations of university supervisors

- ★ Question analysis based on the generic IELTS task prompt

Watching:

★ Rhetorical tasks limited to those required for the test: description, narration

★ Exposition in IELTS classes limited to T1 and T2. EAP involved greater variety e.g. classes on definition

★ IELTS classes typically about reproducing information: from graph or from personal knowledge

★ Teaching 'ways to impress the examiner'

★ Teaching formal style, but not including such academic features as hedging

★ Teaching organisational templates

★ Teaching grammar points relevant to test – error analysis/ useful structures

★ Encouraging use of more formal vocabulary

★ Essays for the IELTS classes were short (100-300 words)

★ Students encouraged to count words

★ Teaching how to use more words – sentence expansion



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# Asking: Questionnaire

## Presage Variables

First Language

Gender

Previous Test Preparation

Nationality

Knowledge of IELTS at entry

Previous Exposure to English

Experience of Writing in L1 and L2

Learning Preferences

Educational Level

Academic Subject

# Asking: Questionnaire Process Variables

Course Length & Intensity

Using English Outside Class

Satisfaction with the Course  
& with the Host Culture

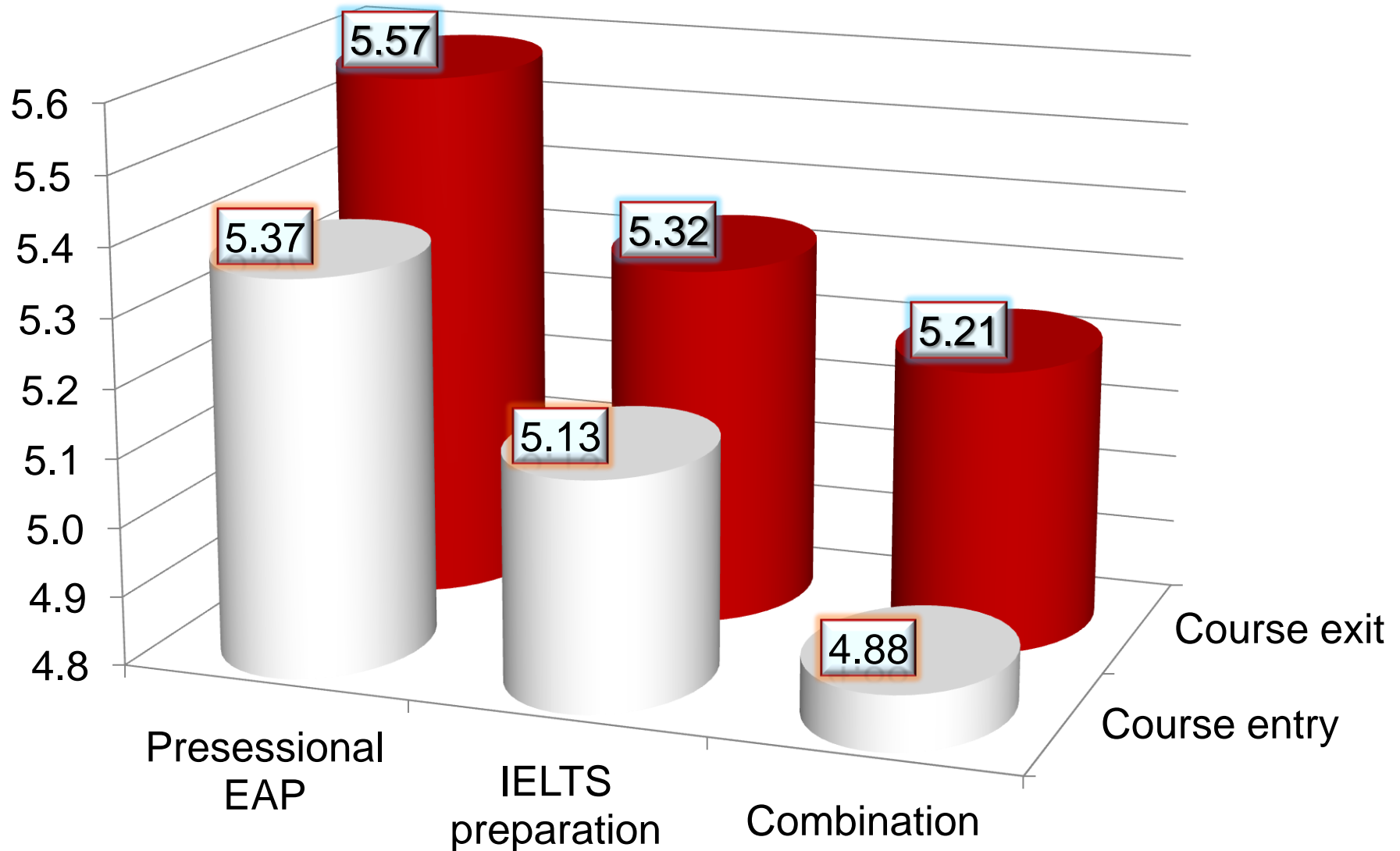
Approach to Learning

Learning Strategies

Course Content

Frequency of Test Practice

# Measuring: IELTS Writing Score Gains by Course Type



# IELTS Writing Score Gains



## *Exit test scores*

= 1.184

+ .405 Initial writing score

+ .018 Initial vocabulary score

+ .010 Initial grammar score

+ .228 Secondary School  
Education (not  
university)

+ .038 Course length in  
weeks

+ .011 Self-confidence in  
English writing ability

+ .070 Enjoyed meeting  
British people

+ .054 Learned to improve  
writing test scores

+ .030 Use of test strategies at  
course exit

# Implications for learners



Limited evidence for benefits of dedicated IELTS preparation: washback to learners of key importance

*IELTS preparation teaches basics of academic writing. We use a one sentence introduction — a very basic technique. If I learn this method, I don't know if it's useful for academic writing such as a dissertation. I don't know how to write for an MA, but I think the basic idea is the same.*

Bei (Chinese student)

Learners need to pass beyond immediate requirements of IELTS AWM to be adequately prepared for academic study



# Implications for ielts

Possible to substantially improve on predictions of score gains by considering

- Instructional differences such as course length
- Individual differences among learners

Stakeholders advised to take account of local context

- Message needs to be reinforced
- Further health warnings needed on relationship between gain scores and periods of study in line with the findings of the research

# Implications for teachers



Teachers need to reflect on...

- the nature of language assessment, assessment qualities and fitness for purpose
  - relationships between test content, test construct and teaching/learning aims
  - relationships between...
    - test-wiseness: exploiting construct irrelevant aspects of test design
    - test familiarisation: learning about test content and format
    - test preparation: building tested skills
- ...and test success
- how best to exploit the motivational effects of a test without sacrificing professionalism

# Implications for policy makers



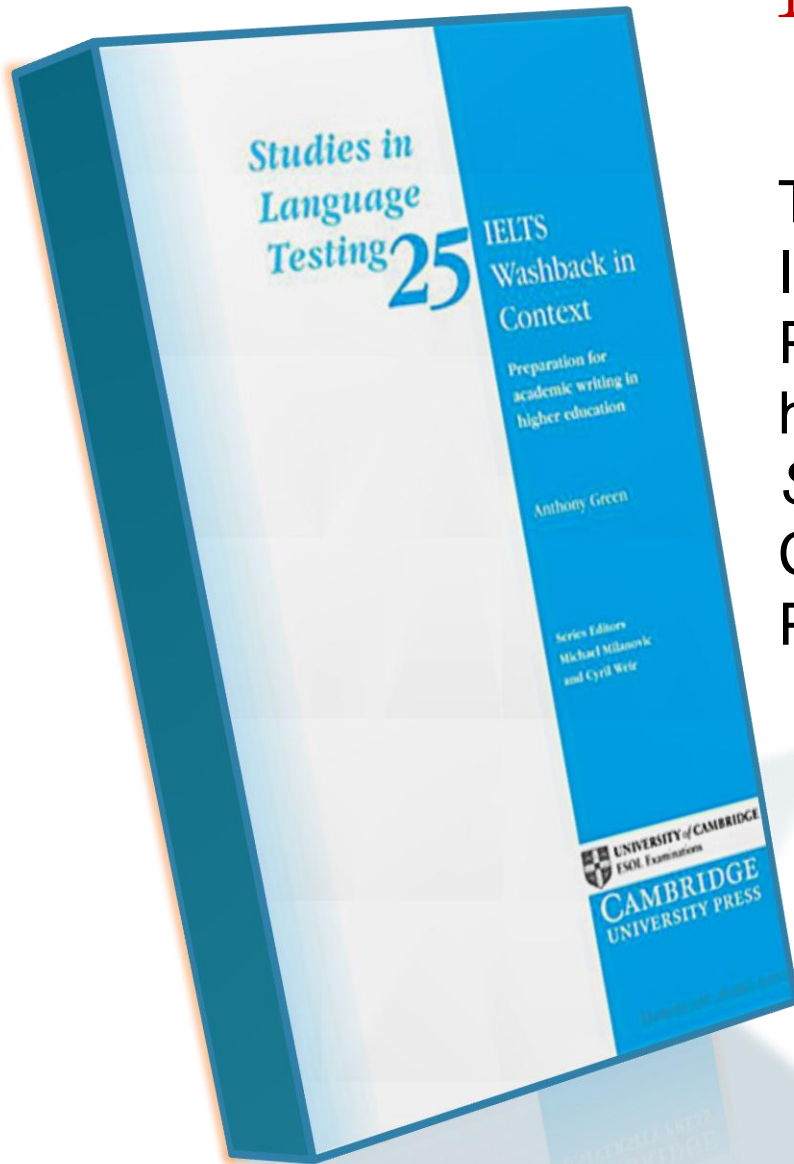
- Tests, however well-made, can do very little to improve teaching and learning
- Tests, even well-made ones, can contribute to damaging effects on teaching and learning
- The most obvious test preparation strategy is to focus on test *content*, teaching and learning tested *skills* is more challenging
- Teachers and learners should be given more information about the thinking behind tests
- Reflective practice should be encouraged – self assessment and greater autonomy can benefit learning

# Harmonizing teaching and testing



- Step 1 What do learners need to know?
  - A shared understanding of learning purposes*
  - What do assessors think they are assessing?*
- Step 2 What do learners know already?
  - Options for diagnosing language abilities*
  - What can assessments tell us about learners' strengths and weaknesses?*
- Step 3 Getting learners from here to there
  - Options for developing abilities*
  - How to develop the skills that will help learners to succeed in the test AND after the test*

# Thank you



To find out more:  
IELTS Washback in Context:  
Preparation for academic writing in  
higher education.  
*Studies in Language Testing 25.*  
Cambridge: Cambridge University  
Press.